Hear My Story: Christian Gausvik transcript

**Lisa MacVittie** 00:00

I'm the last survivor of the Holocaust in our family.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:04

Behind the words pictures and artifacts in the museum are people whose stories of survival and hope come alive to inspire new generations of upstanders. One by one, these stories stir the soul.

**Al Miller** 00:18

Can there really be hope for us?

**Bella Ouziel** 00:20

See, mine is 40018, my sister was 40017,

**Jackie Congedo** 00:28

Holocaust survivors, their descendants, liberators, champions of justice and courageous upstanders ask only this - hear my story - so that the lessons they teach will echo for generations

**Elisha Wiesel** 00:41

 I will never meet someone else like my father, but there are many of us who, if we come together, can keep his voice alive.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:48

These stories will change you. They will move you to action, inspiring the best of humanity every day.

**Trinity Johnson** 00:54

I'm Trinity Johnson. In this episode of Hear My Story, I'm joined by a winner ofthe Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center's Upstander Awards. Dr Christian Gasuvik was honored in 2022 for his medical care and advocacy of patients who sometimes struggle to get medical care that honors their whole humanity. That's where our guest has stepped in to make a difference. Christian, welcome back to the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center. It's not been a very long time since we last saw you, since you were an Upstander Award winner in 2022. Before we get into the incredible work that you're doing in the field of medicine, tell us a little bit about yourself. Who are you? And you what do you do?

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 01:50

yeah, my name's Christian. I'm a local Cincinnati person. So I grew up just across the river in Northern Kentucky, spent all my years there in Fort Thomas. And really, I think something that kind of really formed that time in my life was working in a nursing home. And so that kind of stage, I think, sort of set the stage for the rest of my career thus far. And did my undergraduate degree at Xavier, medical school at UC but I'm a local primary care physician focused on LGBTQ health and geriatrics, and then also founder of The Giving Voice foundation.

**Trinity Johnson** 02:31

Amazing. Thank you. So you're a transplant like me.

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 02:34

 Yeah, across the river at least

**Trinity Johnson** 02:35

a little closer,

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 02:36

which feels like a big distance sometimes. Yeah.

**Trinity Johnson** 02:39

So especially older adults, can can feel quite isolated. How has that shown up in your work? And what have you found has been helpful in combating isolation?

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 02:53

Yeah, I think one thing, and you know, none of us like to talk about COVID, but one thing that really became kind of painfully obvious during that time period, these folks were living in nursing homes and assisted livings, and, you know, out of safety concerns, they really shut down connection to the outside. And so in some ways, that period of time was kind of this test case in what is it like when you take older folks and really isolate them from their family, their friends, from the social interaction, and we saw all of the negative things that happen when that occurs. And so I think something that you know - that was happening at the same time that we were starting to think about the Giving Voice Foundation and think about, how can we use this as an opportunity to really change things for people, and that that point of connection and isolation really kind of bubbled to the surface as this is something we can make an impact on, because there's negative health effects to isolation, and just from a social emotional standpoint, it's really difficult for people to be isolated. And there are many reasons as we age that we become more isolated.

**Trinity Johnson** 03:59

And I can't wait to jump in to talk about Giving Voice, but one of the things you've always emphasized is the importance of story, and the Holocaust & Humanity Center does so much to amplify as many stories as possible, not only from the Holocaust but modern day upstanders and the people who are making a difference on the ground. What have you learned simply just by listening to people's stories?

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 04:22

Yeah, those, some of the memories that stick out the most on that are from the years I was working in a nursing home as a teenager, and just having those kind of brief opportunities to sit down with older folks and hear about the stories from their past, what it was like growing up, what things kind of shaped who they were. And then I think the other side of that was then watching diseases like Alzheimer's kind of steal those stories away. And so as we sort of laid the foundation for Giving Voice, we thought a lot about connection, and we thought a lot about storytelling, and really, kind of, in the vein of - these folks have lost their stories. They've lost their memories. How can we sort of amplify that in a way that reminds us who they were before this disease kind of took away who they are? And I think that process is healing for families as they kind of watch, but it also sort of gives dignity and humanity back to these folks who it's very easy to think like how they're a person in a nursing home. It's a smelly place, it's not somewhere most people want to go, or they're living at home, isolated, but that kind of ability to tell their story, I think, connects them with their past and and makes them real. And I think that's been really an impactful part of what we do.

**Trinity Johnson** 05:38

Yeah, and being a doctor, I mean, it's so important to also listen. So on the one hand, here's this beautiful organization that that you and your partner lead, and also part of medicine. And have you seen where any of the things you're doing have inspired others? Or have you heard from others that they tried something because they heard of your work?

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 06:03

I think it's those like little moments of change that maybe come up at times. So I don't know if I have any good examples of big projects or things that have happened, but I think if I think of myself as just kind of a piece of a bigger picture, and I think how I look at others and think, Well, they've done this by making these little changes. Perhaps I could do the same. I think those are the kind of things that maybe bubble up at times, is folks talking about that and just how those little things add up to bigger change?

**Trinity Johnson** 06:37

Yes, I love it's the little steps, right? Sometimes those are the most important thing to grow into a movement and and how I'll say you've grown that into a movement as you formed this nonprofit, Giving Voice. Can you tell us about that process? How did you come to that? And just share for viewers who have never heard about this organization, share what, the work is,

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 07:01

yeah, so Giving Voice Foundation, we started with an effort and a goal to create connection and engagement for folks living with dementia, and then support for their caregivers. We really saw sort of a gap in the community of especially coming out of COVID, opportunities for folks who are living at home - often these folks have a memory disorder, Alzheimer's, dementia, something like that, and they're living with their spouse, a child, some family member or caregiver, and there's not a lot of opportunity for them to sort of create that sense of community and support that I think we all rely on to be our best. And so that's sort of the space that Giving Voice was born out of, I certainly will not take all the credit. I think we have an amazing team of people. And even even that, to me, it was sort of the power of connection there, of bringing together the right team of people that allowed the organization to form. But our work is really focused on kind of connecting directly with folks in the community. So we host arts programs, dance programs, flower arranging, arts workshops. We work with the opera and other local organizations just to kind of bring folks together in a space that's accessible and easy for them to interact with in a way that feels non judgmental, and then to at the same time, sort of support their caregivers. So it's kind of that dual benefit. It's been really fun and amazing to watch the organization grow and watch new connections form, and kind of see these little snippets of stories from folks that participate, and then really to get to watch our team build this into something that I think is really amazing and making such a big difference for people.

**Trinity Johnson** 08:44

That's awesome. And you've alluded to your strong team, and part of that strength is your husband, Cody, is also part of the team. How does this partnership work? How are you how do you inspire each other in the work that you do? And who are the other types of folks that you have in this organization.

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 09:06

So my husband, Cody is the, like, logical, financial, supportive, kind of, like, get the tasks done. I'm definitely the big dreams, ideas and emotions person, so I think that combo works really well. We're able to sort of support each other's goals in that way. And so he didn't shoot down my crazy idea to start a nonprofit while still in residency, and then kind of has supported it along the way, and that's been great. I think I wouldn't be able to do it without his partnership. And then we have a great team in general. So we have an amazing program director, Kristin, she's just a ball of passion and compassion and works to make sure that everything we're doing is thinking about the person that's receiving our programming. Our executive director Krista, is an amazing person as well. Our operations manager Carly, they're just, it's like just. This wonderful team of people that care so deeply about the work that we're doing, and it just feels good to work with them. It's just it's smooth, it's easy, and it feels like we're doing the right thing. And I think if it had not been for those folks along the way and all the others that have supported us, we never kind of would have gotten to this point.

**Trinity Johnson** 10:21

And so part of being recognized for an Upstander Award in 2022, this is really a special process, because you don't nominate yourself. Other people nominate you, and a couple of the character strengths that they pulled out about you was fairness and justice. So my first question is, do you agree with that? Did you see that in yourself, or are there other strengths you feel like maybe you use more often?

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 10:47

You know, I was thinking about the Upstander Award and that night, and all of all of the things that went along with that, I think one of the best things about it was kind of the ability to reflect on other people's view of me and kind of get that perspective, because, I think probably like yourself, we all spend a lot of time analyzing ourselves and thinking about what we're bad at and what we're good at, and kind of having that ability to step back and see how other people who chose to reach out and nominate someone maybe think about them. I think justice and fairness are good, good words. I have focused a lot on health equality for the LGBTQ community in Cincinnati, and so I think that's been a big area where perhaps fairness and justice have played out. I think there's there's components of that that you could see in the work of the Foundation as well. So yeah, I would agree with those.

**Trinity Johnson** 11:44

Yeah. And I wanted to definitely talk about Giving Voice, but I did also want to touch on your advocacy for the LGBTQ community. Can you share a little bit about that work? And it's so very important. You're you're really at in the middle of two very important movements, right? And also, I think, raising awareness and dialogue. So tell us a little bit about that side of your work as well.

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 12:11

So honestly, I was in residency, my husband and I were looking for a primary care physician. I started asking my contacts, surely, there's someone who is part of the LGBTQ community who's doing primary care in Cincinnati, there really was not, and this was, you know, back 2018, 19, kind of in that time period. Since then, things have improved. But it reminded me, even as I was on this journey to really focus on geriatric health, that there's this component of our community that is really not well represented in medicine, and so I think that's what sort of pushed me to really try to craft a practice that would speak to those patients. And as I really kind of dived into the data around the LGBTQ community and healthcare and their interaction with the healthcare system. There's a lot of data about how much those folks defer healthcare, how many of them don't have primary care physicians because they've either had bad interactions in the past or have fear of judgment? And those stories play out daily as I meet new patients, and they sort of describe things that have happened in their past, ways that they were sort of pushed away from prioritizing their health. And so that's been a really rewarding part of my medical practice, of really focusing on building a practice where folks can feel like they can build the right kind of trust to get the kind of health care that they deserve to get. And I think again, that kind of piece of connection and stories plays out there as well. It's, you know, you hear the stories of what these patients have gone through of various generations, and really working to build that relationship and connection as their medical provider to make sure that that they trust you in a way, that they're going to come to you when they need something, and that you can then reciprocate by by guiding them in the right direction. So I think that's been a great piece of of that part of my life, and it's been really rewarding to kind of build that in the community.

**Trinity Johnson** 14:20

It's amazing. Thank you for your work. And has there been anything that surprised you, as far as you know, launching either of these, these huge things within the community, has anything surprised you? Or have there been any challenges that you face? And if so, how have you overcome those?

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 14:42

Yeah, I think the surprising challenges of the foundation are, I think we're very focused on programs and helping people in that, and you forget that there's this whole kind of it's basically like running a business on the other side, even as a nonprofit. And. So while that learning curve has been fun, I think there's been lots of kind of hurdles and challenges and just in terms of stepping into something that's unfamiliar and new. So again, it's been good, supportive team members that have made the difference there, and I think that's kind of been the piece of that part that's maybe been surprising in terms of the health space, I think surprise, surprising, but not surprising, how much need there was in the community, and just how many people would show up and say, "For years, I've been looking for a gay doctor, and there has not been anyone." And so to be that and know that those people are having an interaction with a medical provider that's different than they've been able to have before, just because we all like to see a little bit of ourselves and the person we're trusting to take care of us. So it's, it's, I think that's been surprising on a conscious level, probably subconsciously, if I'd thought about it, it would not be surprising. But the hurdle is, is having enough time to kind of take care of everybody that that needs that.

**Trinity Johnson** 16:09

And I will say going back to fairness and justice, I feel like perseverance definitely needs to be one of your strengths, because both of these things you said you really took on during residency. Isn't residency busy enough?

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 16:23

It was a busy time. Yeah, I always joke with my husband that I think you can get anything done with polite persistence. So maybe that's the that's the key. But, yeah, I think that was a busy time. But also it takes so much of you that I think sometimes finding those outlets to feel like you're doing other things, to kind of fill up your other buckets, is important too.

**Trinity Johnson** 16:45

That's beautiful. When you found out that you were nominated for an Upstander Award, what did you think?

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 16:51

Immediately, what I think I probably felt surprised. I... you know you think like,"Well, who would have done that?" But... But no... Honored. Grateful. I think, I think hopefully people that are passionate about what they're doing aren't doing it for recognition, but it still feels good to have somebody call it out and recognize that what you're doing is something that's making a difference. So yeah, I think grateful would be the word.

**Trinity Johnson** 17:16

Yeah. And since winning has what's changed? Anything changed? Has this given you a new perspective in any way? Or how does it factor in?

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 17:28

I think it's

**Trinity Johnson** 17:28

as an upstander.

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 17:29

Yeah, I think it's that. I think it's motivating, one when, when you have the reminder that other people are watching, not in a bad way, but just sort of that people are taking notice of what you're doing. It's it's motivating to keep doing good things, the ability to connect with others through that, I think, was inspiring. And it's those you know, amongst a crazy world, at times, it's nice to kind of have some glimpse into the good things that people are doing, and have that as little pieces of motivation to tuck away for yourself, kind of when things feel challenging. So I think, I think those have been good things, again, the kind of piece of connection and and being connected with others that are doing good stuff.

**Trinity Johnson** 18:13

So when other people learn either about you medical practice or even being an upstander and all the things you're doing, the incredible work and giving voice, what do you hope they learn or take away from your story?

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 18:29

I think I always say that being yourself, I think is important, as cliche as it sounds, I think it's kind of being vulnerable about what's important to you and using that, people respond to that. I think when you when they see something that you genuinely care about, I think people want to help, and neither of the things that I have given my time to would have happened if I had not been passionate about them, and if others hadn't seen that, and then wanted to help me with that. So I think letting that out and kind of being vulnerable with what's important to you is definitely a step to kind of making change. And then I think kind of just doing it - like there's always this, you can always find a reason to not do something, and it's it always feels like the momentum is what carries things. And when I reflect back and think of the million steps that occurred between thinking about hosting a fundraiser for Alzheimer's to getting to the point of of running a nonprofit, I think it's an overwhelming list of things that has happened. But it was just... do the first thing, and then the momentum from that pushes you to the second and the third and the fourth and down the hill. And everyone kind of comes along with you when you bring that energy, that that you want to make a change. So, yeah, I think that would be what I would say.

**Trinity Johnson** 19:52

Yeah. I love hearing that, because, one, it creates a ripple effect. Yeah, of change, exactly. But then a lot of what we talk about is building a community of upstanders and how it only takes one person to start a movement and others join in or they're inspired by that work. If you were to give advice to anyone on on where's a good place to get started, or how can they support organizations like yours, what would you tell them?

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 20:24

I mean, I think again, it maybe sounds cliche, but I think when you know something that you care about, even if it seems like a small thing to me, it was I had had this job, and I saw people struggling with Alzheimer's and dementia, and so it was something that I cared about. And you know, the start was just a little fundraiser we had in an art gallery in 2016 and that sort of spun up to where we are now. So I think it's the advice maybe, or the takeaway is, find the thing that you care about, because if you're if you're motivated by the why behind it, I think it's much more likely that you're going to be successful at kind of moving it towards something meaningful, versus just looking for something that might be a good project and then hoping to kind of manufacture the why or the passion behind it in terms of resources. I think, to me, everything that we've done has been from making good connections with other good people, and I think you said a bit about the ripple effect in a community of upstanders. I think it's that, like you have one good connection, that somebody that that you know, might align with your passion or interest, and then they, of course, know someone, and then they know someone, and before you know it, you've sort of built this web. And I think that's when you can really start to see things happen and things get done. And so I think it's just that reaching out to somebody and saying, Hey, this is something I care about. I think we can do something to make this different, and finding those people that feel the same, and then just building that network from there.

**Trinity Johnson** 21:55

And so for people who are watching today, if they want to get involved, what's the best way to get involved with giving voice.

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 22:02

Yeah, so our website's great. We have tons of information on there about programming. Certainly, we have lots of people that volunteer with us. I think volunteering with our programming is sometimes a bit of an emotional experience. I think every time that I go and sit in one of our programs, it is hard to describe, but an interesting feeling to be in the room with so many people that have had their lives changed so significantly, and watch their partners kind of be there to witness them doing something that has some semblance of normalcy. So I think being a volunteer, kind of engaging through that is a really amazing way to connect and be helpful, but also do something good for yourself. Of course, we have fundraisers throughout the year. We host mimosas for memories and brews for brains in the fall. And there are good opportunities to come together in a really kind of engaging way and connect with other people and support what we're doing and learn about what we're doing. So those are probably the easiest ways to kind of reach out, get involved and support us.

**Trinity Johnson** 23:06

So what is the as a upstander winner? How do you define being an upstander?

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 23:13

Think being an upstander is, is being willing to use your voice to change something. And I think as the world has gotten noisier, it's easier for folks voices to either get lost or to forget that we do have power with our voice. And so I think the folks that that are nominated and win these this distinction are the ones that realize that they do have power with their voice, and they can stand up and make a change. And sometimes that's little stuff, and sometimes that's big stuff, or little stuff that turns into big stuff. But I think that's that's maybe what unites a lot of us.

**Trinity Johnson** 23:58

That's beautiful. Thank you so much for being with us today and sharing about the incredible work you're doing. And congratulations again, once an upstander, always an upstander.

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 24:09

Thank you

**Trinity Johnson** 24:09

so thank you so much.

**Dr. Christian Gausvik** 24:10

Thanks.

**Jackie Congedo** 24:12

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